

INTERVIEW WITH LARRY DUNKESON  
BY JERRY FRENCH MAY 16, 2001

MR. FRENCH: This is an oral interview with Larry Dunkeson, in his home. Today is May 16, 2001 and it is about a quarter to two in the afternoon. Larry, this is not a formal thing. If you would care to just tell us your story, or any aspect of it. And tell us any of your favorite parts of the Fish and Wildlife Service. You can begin with your schooling, and your first assignment if you wish to.

MR. DUNKESON: O.K. It doesn't seem possible, but when I retired, I retired with thirty-three years in. That's the part that doesn't seem possible, because the thirty-three years went by so quickly. And they were so enjoyable, and so memorable to me. I really feel old when I think about the fact that I was in the Service for thirty-three years. I went to school at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces, New Mexico. I went down there to study, I didn't know what, for sure. But I looked at the Course Catalog for the University, and there was a heading for Wildlife Management. And I said, "That's it, I'm gonna do it". That's what I studied during the years at New Mexico State. I graduated with a bachelors in Wildlife Management. I didn't know for sure what I was going to do, although I went home and finished the requirements for a teaching certificate. Even though I wasn't sure I was going to do that. My wife was going to be a teacher and we thought that it would be nice if we were both teachers. Before I actually graduated in teaching, I got a call from my major professor, Dr. John Wood, who is now long gone. He told me that a friend of mine from school had just quit his job in Albuquerque with the Fish and Wildlife Service. He was working for what we then called, Predator and Rodent Control. He told me that I might think about that. I did, I knew immediately that I wanted to do that. So I called Albuquerque, which is two hundred miles away. I set up an appointment to go interview with the director of the state Predator and Rodent Control division. I went up to Albuquerque and interviewed him. What he wanted was someone to go out and trap Coyotes, which was fine, except that I didn't know anything about trapping Coyotes. I knew what a Coyote looked like, and that's about as far as it went. He hired me anyway. They gave me an area to work in, and to run trap lines in. Most of it was east of Albuquerque, where there were small ranchettes. The people were being bothered because their pets were disappearing to Coyotes. So I went out and set up trap lines, as I had been instructed to do, or in the manner in which I was instructed to do. I didn't catch anything! It was a long time before I finally caught my first Coyote. And I was so proud of myself, even though the Coyote was dead, that I went into town, Moriarty, for breakfast. I had that dead Coyote in the back of the International Scout that I had been issued. I thought that people might ask me about that Coyote lying back there. Nobody cared. All they really wanted to know was that it was dead. It's gone. That was an introduction. I staid with trapping Coyotes for about eight months, and pretty quickly came to the decision that I didn't want to spend my whole career trapping Coyotes, and setting out "Coyote getters" which we used at that time. So I made a trip across the street in downtown Albuquerque to interview with somebody, I didn't care who, about maybe getting over into Refuges. I wanted to spend some time in Refuges. As it turned out, the first person I talked to was the lady who was in charge of the office. Her name was Mary

Bolivar. She is long gone now. I told her what I wanted. She led me to the back, down a corridor to an office where I had never been before. And she introduced me to a man who was at that time, the assistant regional supervisor for refuges. His name will be familiar to most people. His name was Lynn Greenwalt. Later, he became the director of the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. And Lynn was very nice to me. He interviewed me and knew that I didn't know a whole lot, because I had just gotten out of school. But, he said, "Where in the U. S. would you like to go with Refuges, geographically"? I said, "It doesn't matter, I just want to get on a refuge". He asked me what kind of refuge would I like: migratory, breeding, or winter stopover. I told him that it didn't matter. "I just would like to get on a refuge". He said asked me if I had any children. I told him, "No, we haven't been married too long. We've been in school we don't have any children". He then said, "Well, I have a place for you". Two weeks later, after lining up the moving truck, my wife and I arrived at Fish Springs National Wildlife Refuge, which is out on the salt flats in Utah. It seemed like, at that time, a really godforsaken place, but it was a refuge, and it didn't matter to me. That's what I wanted. An interesting story is that, on the way in there, Fish Springs is a long ways from anyplace, and we drove, and drove, and drove. Finally, we came around the last corner, and saw the headquarters. At that point, my wife, Pat, thank goodness she's here, burst into tears. And I don't mean little wet spots around her eyes. I mean alligator tears that ran down her cheeks! Her comment was, " I'm going back on 'the Pill' ". That was a good plan, but as I'll tell you, it didn't work out. We were at Fish Springs. We had arrived at a refuge, and that's what I had wanted. That was the beginning of my career with Refuges. Of course, I was already an employee with U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. From Fish Springs, we traveled, literally, all over the country. If I can remember all of it, we went from Fish Springs to Mackay Island in North Carolina. That was a long way. It was a big adventure to go all the way across the country. From there, we went to Mason Neck in Virginia. It becomes a blur after a while. At Mason Neck, I went into what used to be called the Departmental Training Program. I think it's called something else now, but I was able to go through that. From there, I switched over to Ecological Services because there was an opening in Ecological Services in Washington, state. I can't think of the town. Any way, it will come to me. We transferred out there to Olympia. That was it, Olympia, Washington. We staid there for about two and a half years. That's a beautiful place, we enjoyed that assignment. After that, an opening came up at the Desert Game Range, down in Las Vegas, Nevada. I applied for that. And I was able to get it. The Desert Game Range, it was then called "Game Range", it was so big. It was one and a half million acres, much of which we couldn't even get on, because it was a bombing and gunnery range for the Air Force. A lot of it, we couldn't even go on because there was live ordinance lying around. We staid here for about a year and a half, then I had a chance to transfer back into the Washington office. {D.C.} Which meant that we made another move, back into Virginia. I worked in the Division of Refuges, there, in the Washington office. I worked in the Division of Migratory Birds while I was there, also. That was a good assignment. There was a lot of science going on there. It doesn't sound like it, but there was. From there, we had a chance to move, again, to Albuquerque, which is where we started. We always thought that we would like to get back to Albuquerque. I applied for the job, here in Albuquerque in the Division of Realty. I was selected, and we moved back to Albuquerque. Our kids made one comment when we got

back to Albuquerque, after living in Washington, and seeing all that there is to see in Washington. They said, "This is a nice place to live, there aren't very many museums here for us to see". Although my youngest boy was somewhat afraid to move here, because he was sure that he was going to be the "Anglo" in all of his classes. And that he would have to wear a sombrero, like all of the other kids were probably wearing. He found, when he got here, that this wasn't the case. I staid in the Division of Realty, for about fifteen years. Those were good years. I got to see a lot of country, and I got to meet a lot of people. We bought a lot of dirt that eventually ended up in national wildlife refuges. We even bought some land for fish hatcheries. Then, after being in Realty for fifteen years, things changed. Supervisors changed, the job changed, and it became clear to me that retirement was probably the next step I should take. And I did that. I retired from the Fish and Wildlife Service in July of 2000, which is about, almost two years ago now.

MR. FRENCH: It's right at one year.

MR. DUNKESON: One year ago. Time flies when you're having fun.

MR. FRENCH: Larry, you were, as I understand it, one of the first managers at Mason Neck. Is that correct?

MR. DUNKESON: That is correct. I opened up Mason Neck.

MR. FRENCH: Would you care to discuss what it's like to open a new refuge.

MR. DUNKESON: It's difficult, because Mason Neck was established for the Bald Eagle. It was established because of pressure from local residents who wanted that area preserved. They used the Bald Eagle as their reason for preservation. I think that the more overlying reason was because with a refuge established there, there wouldn't be any more building. Since they had homes out there, this would protect them [the residents] from being overrun by Washington's sprawl and people. They were taking care of themselves. The refuge was established, and I did a lot of "kibitzing" with people, even doing news stories with the local television stations. That was part of setting Mason Neck up. The other part was getting out on the ground, and trying to see what it was that we had out there. We established some trails. I put in a bridge over a ditch. In this part of the country we call it an "unroyo", but it was a ditch caused by the rain. Then the refuge manager from Blackwater, whom I worked for, came over and saw that bridge, he said, "No that won't work because it's too flimsy". So I had to rebuild the bridge. And as far as I know, that bridge is still there today. The trails are still there. We really didn't have any money, being a new refuge. I had enough money to buy gas for my used pickup. I got a used pickup that was going to scrapped I think. That's what I used to go back and forth to Blackwater. We built a visitor contact station. And subsequently, somebody who didn't like the refuge got out there one night and burned it down. I got a call from a local friend, and he said, "Larry, your refuge in on fire"! Which caused me a lot of concern. So I ran out there, and the fire was out by that time. But that was the end of that visitor contact station, which I think they have rebuilt since. Mason Neck has

been added to several times. Both by purchasing land that went into the refuge, and by picking up excess land from the military that was added to the refuge, even though it was disjoined from the refuge. Mason Neck gets a tremendous visitor visitation now, and it is a very popular spot in the Washington area. In fact, from the refuge itself, you'd stand out on the Potomac River, a lot of the refuge fronts on the Potomac River. If you look up river on a clear day, you could see Mount Vernon. That gives an idea of where it is. It's right down the river from Mount Vernon.

MR. FRENCH: Larry, through your interview, you've worked with Animal Damage Control, Refuges, Ecological Services, a tour in the Washington regional office. Would you care to comment on these varied experiences? Your experience is certainly different from what many of us have had. Many of us get in one place and stick there. You've had the courage to venture out. Would you care to discuss how these things added to themselves or possibly detracted?

MR. DUNKESON: That's been one of the high points of my career. The chance to see a lot of different places, and work on, not only refuges, but lands within the Fish and Wildlife Service in different places. Our tour in North Carolina, which was at Mackay Island National Wildlife Refuge, was a fun place to be. And it was interesting because of the people who lived there. Many of which were descendents of the original settlers of the Outer Banks who came in from England. They spoke with a very heavy early English accent. Some of them, I couldn't even understand. But I got to know them and became friends with them. That was an advantage to moving around like we did, to all of the different places. My children, who are now grown and have families of their own, remember a lot of those places, even though they don't remember exactly where they were. They remember having been there. And they remember people from being there. We moved a number of times. And that was back in the days when the Fish and Wildlife Service had enough money to move people. It was an adventure for us. I would recommend, having been through it, taking the opportunity to see all these different places, and experience all these different locales. From Gettysburg, on to the Outer Banks in North Carolina, to Olympia, Washington, which was a beautiful, and fun place. Once you got used to the fact that in Olympia, no matter what you did, it was going to rain. Once you accepted that, you were ok. My tours, and time in the Fish and Wildlife Service have done a lot, I think, to broaden my perspective on life. It certainly it gave us the chance to see a lot of places that we probably would not have seen otherwise.

MR. FRENCH: You've done a lot for my career. Long ago, you got me interested in collecting old refuge signs. And I know that you have been interested in the heritage of the Service for a long time. Would you care to expand on how you got interested in that particular aspect of the career?

MR. DUNKESON: Well, beginning to gather old things happened pretty much at Mason Neck. On the private land at Mason Neck, there were a lot of old trash piles, and outdoor "johnnie" sites. We found that digging into an outdoor johnnie was a good place to find old bottles. Many times, men would go out there, and drink in the outhouse, and drop the bottle down the hole. Of course, over the years, all of that rotted, so it wasn't a bad

experience. But there were a lot of trash piles on the private land, if you could find them. Sometimes that was difficult, and sometimes it wasn't. I started to collect old bottles out there, and I got into an antique bottle club. That was fun for me because it provided me with bottles from other members of the club. From then on, it was just a natural jump to start collecting refuge boundary signs. Being in the Division of Realty, later in my career, I was able to visit a lot of refuges. The people who worked there said, "We use to have those old signs, and they're still out there on posts. But they are all Interior boundary signs". They don't do anything. They get shot at. So, occasionally, I would pick up a boundary sign from an old refuge. The old refuge maintenance man always had a pile of old signs somewhere, if you could just get him to remember, or admit where that junk pile was. Every refuge has a bone yard and often times, the pile of old signs would be down in the bone yard. They were not being used anymore, or they were outdated, or whatever. They ended up being junked, down in the bone yard. After starting on old bottles at Mason Neck, like I say, it was a natural jump to go to old signs. I collected boundary signs for a long time. I had quite a full collection of metal signs, as far as I knew. Those have all been donated to the Fish and Wildlife Museum, back in Shepherdstown, West Virginia.

MR. FRENCH: Larry, I thank you very much. If there is anything that you care to add, we'll just kind of close this thing up. And for the benefit of the transcriber, my name is Jerry French I failed to put that in at the first. That makes it easier for the transcriber to know what's going on. I appreciate very much your thoughts, and remembrances.

MR. DUNKESON: There is one thing that I'd like to point out. This just occurred to me. And I think that Jerry will go along with it: We did so much moving around, and each move was an adventure, and each move was strongly gone along with by my wife. She wanted to see other parts of the country. And wanted to meet other people. For those people who are still in the Fish and Wildlife Service, and who are in jobs that are going to cause them to move around, or see different places, if you can find a life partner who is also interested in doing that, and enjoys doing that. I would sure recommend it, because it makes moving, and new jobs so much more enjoyable if you've got somebody there to talk to, and who encourages you, and enjoys doing that.

MR. FRENCH: I can't agree more with you. As my wife says, "We've never made a bad move". We lived in some strange houses. We got the kids in some strange schools. It wasn't until my daughter got into college that she said "This is the longest I've ever staid in one school". But we gained a great deal from it. The two daughters got to "sample" more than just one community, and more than one way of life. O. K, Larry, I thank you very much.

MR. DUNKESON: You are quite welcome. It was my pleasure.